


# Navy Mom Grieves Loss of Only Child

By Dan Steber,  
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Although her son died two years ago, Patricia Layne still grieves his loss. FC3 Nicholas Bockrath was a young Sailor with a bright smile—one that his mom said “would light up a room.” That light stopped shining when Petty Officer Bockrath ran off the edge of the pavement, overcorrected, crossed a median, and died on the other side of a divided road. He was the victim of his own fatigued driving.

In an interview for this story, Patty, as she prefers to be called, shared a few memories of her son. She talked about his constant smile, activities, friends, decision to join the Navy, and his miraculous entry into this world. Her courage to tell this story is commendable, and I hope it will make every Sailor and Marine think a little bit about decisions that affect their personal safety. You’ll see it’s not just the victim who suffers in a mishap.

“Nick always was smiling, laughing, giving hugs, and almost never failed to end his conversations with ‘I love you,’” said Patty. “The only time he ever got upset was when he couldn’t figure something out. He’d fall and jump right back up without ever shedding a tear,



**Patricia Layne is left with photos of her son and a tribute that some Sailors did on the back window of her SUV.**

but, if he got a new video game and couldn't figure it out, then he'd get upset."

She recalled his fascination with video games. "He started playing Nintendo when he was 3 years old by looking at the pictures in video instructions," Patty said. "I always was amazed at his ability. He always was special because I had been told I wouldn't be able to conceive. It was three months into a "sickness" that specialists discovered my pregnancy.

"When I was five months pregnant," she added, "the doctors put me on complete bed rest, so I never

really expected Nick to make it. But Nick was a fighter and did survive. In fact, he was the first grandchild in my family and the first boy among my friends. As he grew, Nick's choice of friends varied wildly. I never knew whom he'd bring home: boy or girl, rich or poor, and from a full spectrum of ethnic backgrounds. I just never knew, but I did know if Nick liked them, I'd like them. He was a very good judge of character."

His decision to join the Navy was a troubling period. "I was devastated," Patty said. "I had joined a savings program at work, so I wouldn't have to worry about money for his college years. I never dreamed he'd join a branch of service, especially since my family had spoiled him so much."

Nick had asked his mother several times in his senior year what she thought he might do with his life. "I'd laugh and say 'enjoy it' and then tell him to take a few months off after school to think about his future plans," she added. "He continued to work for his cousin, which he had done since 14 years old (when the price of tennis shoes went over \$100—one of his favorite items to wear). In fact, he worked there until about three or four weeks before he left for the Navy."

Recalling the accident and its aftermath, Patty wondered about Nick's incessant activity and constant bouncing around. "I sometimes wonder if somehow he knew he only had a short time left," she answered. "At his 18th birthday party, he told me he had enlisted and wanted to know if I was upset. I explained that I was a bit but only for selfish reasons and because I loved him so much. Little did I know he had such a short time left."

Patty spoke of the last call she received from Nick. He had left her house in Richmond and had stopped to shop for a new pair of sneakers before heading for a class at Dahlgren. "Nick just had received orders to Japan eight days earlier and was so excited," she said. "He called me about 1 p.m. that day to tell me about his shopping adventure and the new tennis shoes he wanted to take to Japan but said he couldn't find them. I told him that we would look on the Internet when he returned the following day but then remembered he had to stand duty."

She reminded Nick that they'd have to do it on Saturday because of his duty, and she recalled him



Nick and fiancée, Holly, share a tender moment before his tragic mishap. Nick Jr. would be born after his father's death. (Inset) "Grandma" Layne with Nick Jr.



laughing out loud and saying, “Oh, yeah, that’s right. I can’t believe you remembered and I forgot.”

“We’ll do it Saturday,” she responded.

Nick’s last words to his mother were, “Well, I gotta go. I love you, and I’ll talk to you soon.”

And she answered, “When Nick? When will I talk to you?”

Patty remembered that he started laughing again and said, “Soon, Mama, soon.”

Patty went on with the story, mentioning that she had been at the mall to buy a couple pair of jeans for Nick, even though he had told her not to do it. “I returned home and checked the answering machine,” she said. “There were a lot of hang-up calls, and I thought someone was dialing the wrong number. I didn’t give it any more thought because my friends knew I had a cellphone and they would call me that way.”

It was only about 15 minutes later that the phone rang again. “When I answered it, I looked outside and saw a big SUV in the driveway, with two guys getting out,” she said. “The person on the phone told me his name. He was a lieutenant commander and said they needed to come in to speak with me. He also wanted me to put away the dogs.

“I remember asking myself why they were there because I never had heard of military officers coming to your house simply because your loved one had orders to an overseas command,” she added. “He again asked me to put away the dogs, and it suddenly dawned on me that the only time a service rep knocks on your door is to deliver bad news.”

Deeply worried, Patty kept thinking this wasn’t happening, and she didn’t want to let the CACO [*casualty assistance calls officer*] in. “God wouldn’t do this to me when I had put all my trust in Him to watch over Nick when I couldn’t,” she said, while putting on a robe. “They asked me to sit down and proceeded to tell me that Nick had been in an accident. I still didn’t believe it and told them that God never would do this to me because He knew how much I loved Nick and that my life revolved around him.”

Patty went on to describe that moment and remembered the two Navy representatives kept talking, but she didn’t comprehend anything. “I was in a daze until they mentioned his yellow truck,” she said. “At that moment, I knew they were right but still didn’t want to believe the news.”

Suddenly, Steven—one of Nick’s friends—pulled into the driveway, and one of the Navy guys went outside to tell him. “I remember seeing Steven cross his arms and put his head on the fence, as his body shook



Nick liked the Navy and had accepted orders to a new ship based in Japan.

with tremendous sobs,” she said. “I sat there watching but not believing. The lieutenant commander then asked me if there was anyone else I needed to call. I remember telling him that no one else lived with me. Steven then reminded me to call my ex-husband.”

The Navy representatives stayed with Patty until another person arrived.

“I remember very little about Nick’s [*funeral*] service,” she said. “I didn’t have to do anything because the Navy and my ex-husband took care of everything. Nick’s Navy classmates were there, and the funeral-home officials said they never had seen that many people at a service. I remember sitting by Nick’s bedroom door for weeks afterward, waiting for him to come out. The past few years have been a blur, and I occasionally still sit beside Nick’s door, waiting for him to appear.”

A favorite hat and a mirror from his beloved truck bear solemn witness to a life lost too soon.

For what would have been Nick's 21st birthday, Patty and her mother went to Yokosuka, Japan, to visit a couple of his friends and to visit USS *John S. McCain*, which would have been Nick's next assignment. I was allowed to go on board the ship and got a great tour. I didn't get to see where Nick would have worked, but I got a good idea."

Some of his shipmates went out for dinner with Patty and her mother after the visit, and they had a beer in Nick's memory. "We sat and reminisced about him, trying our hardest to hold our composure," Patty went on. "One of his friends, the one who took his position on the ship, mentioned that he had told his shipmates all about Nick and how they would've really liked him. Another friend, who had spoken at Nick's service, told the group about their antics together, including a few things that I hadn't even heard about. It really warmed my heart to hear that they hadn't forgotten Nick."

Rather than bury herself in sorrow, which most people would understand, Patty took an active role in trying to prevent similar incidents from taking the lives of other Sailors or Marines. "I don't want other families to go through the pain that my family and Nick's friends have had to endure," she said. "I want to do what I can to help."

Her story came to light when she signed up for the Good Samaritan pilot program being tested in the Norfolk area (Mid-Atlantic Region). She signed up on the Naval Safety Center website ([www.safetycenter.navy.mil/samaritan](http://www.safetycenter.navy.mil/samaritan)) and shared her story and that of her son. Patty was so adamant about the dangers of driving while tired that she wanted the Navy to publish her home phone number and address. "I'd rather have a Sailor or Marine stay at my house in Richmond than risk driving back to the Tidewater area," she said. "If they are too tired to drive and are in the area, they can call me, and I'll pick them up."

Her courage and conviction was not lost on the Naval Safety Center. The Navy lost 73 people in FY04; 10 of those deaths were fatigued-driving related, and that number could be higher because



numerous "unknown" reasons were cited in mishap reports. In comparison, 20 of the 73 deaths were attributable to alcohol.

"Ms. Layne's story is the type of tragedy that we are working to prevent," said then-Commander, Naval Safety Center, RADM Dick Brooks. "Too often, our people think they are 'bulletproof' and that an incident like this won't happen to them. Ms. Layne reminds us that behind every number on a chart or a line on a graph sits a family, and they hurt beyond belief when they lose a loved one."

To help the traffic-safety cause, Patty has done a video testimonial about the loss of her son and the impact that loss has had on her and her family. "He was going to be a 20-year career Sailor, and then he planned to do 20 years in the FBI. Nick had his life planned," she said, "but all those hopes and dreams ended that tragic day two years ago, and my life has not been the same since."

Patty has offered to speak to Navy or Marine Corps commands about her son's mishap, the impact his death has had on everyone who knew him, and the grieving process—how she has carried on since the accident. Her contact information is available in the "Speaker's Bureau" section of the Naval Safety Center's website ([www.safetycenter.navy.mil](http://www.safetycenter.navy.mil)). She offered one last thought, "If you're tired, don't drive; do yourself and your family a favor because your life is on the line, and your loved ones' lives could be affected forever." ■

*For more information about FC3 Nicholas Bockrath and to see the website dedicated to his life, visit [www.nickbockrath.com](http://www.nickbockrath.com). For more information about traffic-safety efforts, visit [www.safetycenter.navy.mil/ashore/motorvehicle/default.htm](http://www.safetycenter.navy.mil/ashore/motorvehicle/default.htm).*